

# Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

December 10, 2023

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## Cold Comfort

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Where do you go for comfort? Is there a particular place that represents comfort for you? Or perhaps you find comfort in a particular person or a beloved pet. There are, of course, stereotypes of comfort. This time of year we think of comfort as warmth and shelter. Perhaps comfort looks like a warm beverage, a fire in the fireplace, a good book, and lots of blankets. Though perhaps I'm describing coziness more than comfort.

That is not the sort of comfort the prophet Isaiah is speaking of in our reading from that book. The comfort mentioned there is the comfort of a parent towards the unruly child that just ignored parental instruction and touched the hot stove anyway. Israel is dealing with the consequences of its selfishness, and now that those consequences are easing, God comes to shepherd the scattered exiles and care for them. The comfort Isaiah is looking for is the comfort found in God's faithfulness.

This same theme gets picked up in our Epistle reading too. 2 Peter understands God's patience as a comfort towards humanity. This is the comfort found in the knowledge of an infinitely patient God who will come to us, again and again and again. A stubborn God who steadfastly refuses to let us go, despite how often we hurt and harm.

The psalmist in Psalm 85 finds comfort in God's eternal nature. If you look at that Psalm again you will quickly note that it is largely future oriented. "Steadfast love and faithfulness **will** meet; righteousness and peace **will** kiss each other," says verse 10. That is a very comforting thought! But it is a future oriented one. The psalmist has plenty of reason for hope and comfort, but it is all grounded in God's future action.

The comfort being described in these readings is a different sort of comfort than what we typically think of. It is certainly not the comfort of being cozy and

safe in front of a fireplace! This comfort is the comfort of a friend sitting with you while your loved one is dying. This is the comfort offered when reparations are made to some who has been oppressed. This is the comfort of being forgiven when the person you harmed has every reason to hate you forever.

It is the same comfort that John the Baptizer offers to the people of Israel in our gospel text today. It can feel like a cold comfort, but that is simply because it is the comfort of the wilderness. John is bringing the comfort he found out in the wild where he came from; where his very survival was dependent upon the natural resources provided by God. John is offering the comfort of locusts and wild honey...not the richest and most delicious food. In fact, food that can be difficult to acquire, prepare, and even eat; but food that will comfort an empty belly. He is offering the comfort of itchy, smelly camel skin clothing. Those clothes offer the comfort of warmth, and that's about it.

These are cold comforts...wilderness comforts. And these are comforts we need on the Way of Christ. For we will find ourselves in the wilderness as we journey. We will find ourselves in inhospitable climates and situations. We will find ourselves in places of testing and temptation. We will find ourselves wandering about in demon-infested lands. And when we're in the wilderness we will need all the comfort we can fund.

I inflicted many of these cold comforts on my wife the first time I took her to the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness in northern Minnesota. I did my best to prepare her for what the experience is like, but nothing can truly prepare you for wilderness experiences...even fairly straightforward ones like canoe trips!

Our greatest need for comfort occurred on our third day in the Wilderness. We were making for a larger lake named Ogishkemuncie. Now, Ogish (as it's known in the area) is a long narrow lake with a decent number of campsites on it. We were hoping to get a campsite on the eastern end of the lake where we entered from, but we had terrible luck; campsite after campsite was occupied. It is quite a defeated feeling when you've already been canoeing for 5-6 hours and you just want to land one final time for the day...but each time you turn a bend and see a campsite you also see tents and canoes. It can make your heart sink to your toes.

By this time we were committed to crossing the rest of this three mile lake to get to where a few more campsites were located in the western end. Christina

was in the bow of the canoe and I was in the stern. As we left the last (occupied) campsite in the eastern part of lake and made our way toward the western half, I could tell Christina was tiring, but what I couldn't tell was that she was also beginning to despair a bit. And no wonder! She was tired and hungry and wet and cold, and every time we found a potential place to be done and rest...we couldn't. Our entire group just wanted the comfort of a place to be...the comfort of rest and food. The very basic sorts of comforts we mostly take for granted. And to be denied even those small comforts! Oof!

We eventually made it across the lake and found an open campsite. The relief we felt was amazing! Our group was quite worn out...we had enough energy to make peanut butter sandwiches for ourselves and that was about it. But wow! Those peanut butter sandwiches! They were the best sandwiches I have ever had. They were a cold comfort...a wilderness comfort.

The campsite we found ended up being a cold, wilderness comfort too. It was on the small side and right next to a marshy part of the lake, which meant extra mosquitoes. But you know what? We stayed an extra night in that cramped, buggy campsite because we needed the comfort of it. Even the cold, wilderness comfort of a campsite we would have otherwise avoided is comfort.

Places of wilderness tend to be inhospitable places, places we often find ourselves in by unforeseen circumstance rather than by choice. These are places where we are confronted by our vulnerability, by our limitedness. They are also places where we are forced to acknowledge our dependence on God. Being stripped of other comforts, being forced to rely on God's providence in nature, orienting ourselves towards God's future, and having to trust in God's steadfast mercy and love all come from the cold comfort of the wilderness. John the Baptizer understood this and taught it, comforting the people of Israel with words of remonstrance and repentance.

John joins with numerous prophets before him in offering cold, wilderness comfort. The great leveling of things mentioned in Isaiah promises that all needs are met, and that justice will prevail. God's cold, wilderness comfort calls us to examine our privilege...our creature comforts (for that is what we typically think of when we think of comfort), and how those comforts and privileges can harm others. God's cold, wilderness comfort forces us to acknowledge our dependence on God and our interdependence on one another.

Comfort can be found in the wilderness. A different, often colder sort of comfort, true, but in many ways a deeper and more real comfort. So don't be afraid when you suddenly find yourself in the wilderness. God is there too! Our patient, merciful, wild, generous, gracious, shepherding, loving God is there too. And God meets us with what we need...even when that's cold, wilderness comfort. Amen.